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ABSTRACT

Raw material for writing may be found by eavesdropping on conversations and informal speeches, and transcribing graffiti and written texts from the street. These snippets of the surrounding flow of language are recorded in notebooks and categorized, later to work their way into a variety of writings of a professional writer and teacher of writing. The hearing and recording of these language gifts is the central mission of a writer and a key invitation to writing students. Students gather their own language gifts and discuss them in class and are then invited to turn those gifts into writing. (RS)

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The Writer/Teacher as Professional Eavesdropper

by Kim R. Stafford

As a free-wheeling writer of personal essays, I hold a dark secret: I was once a medievalist, a scholar. I once haunted libraries, pored over glossaries, thumbed my Pearl and my Beowulf to rags. I have written twenty pages on the use of the feminine pronoun in a single stanza of an obscure poem from the fourteenth century; I have worked sleepless through nights to dawn, heating cold rooms with the sheer stamina of my reading. I have internalized the nuances of suffixes in ancient texts, so that I can recite what I no longer understand. That was a long and wonderful training for something I don't do.

Now that I write, what do I do with that training? Now that I teach writing, how does my scholarship pertain? For both writing and teaching, I now turn that tireless scholarly attention to the flow of language that surrounds me in the world. I read talk. I annotate conversation. I catalog graffiti. I favor the traveler's fictions in bus stations, the soft confessions of

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the midnight lounge car on the train. I long for the banter of hitchhikers listing their rides and destinations, the semi-public narratives of small cafes. I scribble and study conversations at the twenty-four hour Elkhorn Cafe in Jackson Hole; I record fictions spoken at the Burns Brothers Truck Plaza south from Portland. I take the corner booth, hunch over my coffee, and listen both ways. I fit my elbows to the twin worn spots at the counter, and tune in to the frayed periphery of my hearing. I revel in speeches flaunted at the Acropolis Diner, in Brooklyn, as I once read the annual publications of the Early English Text Society.

I live in the modern world, but my habits are old. In the medieval period, books were so rare they were memorized. Travelers took turns reciting favorite texts. The feast of stories exchanged by the pilgrim band in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales exaggerates a social custom that was actual. The first book with pagination didn't appear until the fifteenth century; people knew the books they owned. Chaucer's contemporary John Gower apparently had eight books in his personal library; he had memorized all eight, and wove quotations from them throughout his work. But as Socrates had warned his students, once we learn to read we will forget how to remember. Gutenburg imprisoned literature, and schools maintain the tyrrany. How can we join the world again?

One chill morning I was walking across my college campus, in haste for the fall convocation, when I passed two maintenance

workers sunk hip-deep in a ditch to repair a steam pipe. Mud covered their feet, steam hissed about their heads, and one said to the other as I passed, "As the world grows colder around us, sincerity and honesty must be the fire to keep us warm." I smiled with pleasure, savoring this literature of the street, and went on, head down, to work. But then I stopped abruptly. On the steps to the auditorium, I took out the tiny notebook I always carry in my heart-pocket to write such sentences down. I would hear, or read, or invent nothing better for some days. Sincerity and honesty--cou'd I live by these? Could I write and teach by these?

Some of my colleagues in the language-rich professions of teaching and writing admit they overhear such occasional gems, but they often explain them away.

"Those maintenance workers were probably some of our English majors," said a colleague, "who couldn't get real jobs."

"Did you make that up?" said another.

"Yeah, sure you heard that!"

What is this cynicism about language, and about humanity? Genius lives where the language lives. Some witness it, overhearing by chance; I do so professionally. I do so because eavesdropping makes of life a perpetual feast, and because I'm not often smart enough as a writer to invent things as good as what I hear. Another way to say that may be more honest: by listening to the glories of conversations around me, I'm reminded to listen to my own thoughts and dreams. In their inventive talk, my wise neighbors give me permission to take seriously my own

quiet internal voice.

In my experience, pleasure in writing begins with a sense of abundance--abundant knowledge, and boundless curiosity. A student writer, or a professional journalist, can get by without abundance, but cannot thrive. Yes, anyone can begin with just enough information to fill a required writing assignment. Writing can feel like an examination. Or it can feel like flight. I find that feeling of abundance from the fat little notebook in my pocket. I urge my students to study the hum of talk around them, and to bring fragments to class so we may revel together. I urge them to attend to the common muse. I love Chaucer, but Chaucer is not my muse. Published literature is not my muse. For the muses are all around us, and seem ordinary but are very busy, very generous. I listen everywhere, hush my companion when a good story drifts into range, pull out my notebook and smile.

"I'll tell you later," I whisper.

I make my notebooks two and three-quarters by four and a quarter inches, from three sheets of paper folded, slit, and sewn into brown coverstock with black thread flavored with beeswax. The little book is a plain and fragrant object. I fold it open to the next fresh page, and slip it into my shirt pocket. I make up a dozen notebooks at a time, stick an address label on the inside cover of each, and date them as I begin. On the outside cover I put a stamp, usually the one-center with the pen and inkwell that proclaims, "The ability to write--a root of democracy." Such a notebook lasts me about a week. Every few months, I sit down with

a stack of notebooks, and glean the best stories, sayings, and thoughts, and I file these with essays in progress.

What fills these notebooks and how are they used in writing and teaching? I'd like to pass along representative raw texts as I've encountered them, give some thoughts about how I tend to use such material in my own writing, and mention a few ways the habits of the eavesdropper might be useful in teaching.

For my students, I suggest a way to catalog their eavesdropping into several key categories: (1) conversations overheard; (2) informal speeches; (3) written texts from the street; and (4) graffiti and short phrases. One might label sections of the notebook by these or similar categories, but I don't. I take it all as it comes. From such external voices, we move to eavesdropping on our own dreams and our daily, fleeting thoughts. In a way, I am an informal folklorist of the world and eavesdropper on the self, and I encourage my students to conduct fieldwork on their own cultures and their own minds. We start by taking dictation from the world.

Conversations Overheard

In a cafe in San Antonio, I listened as two truck drivers discussed their route toward Houston. They talked about how to take the blue highways to get around the city, but still make good time. Then there was a quiet conversation I couldn't hear. After a pause, the young one spoke with conviction.

"You could call that the source of all knowledge. You could

say 'self,' and be exact about all people." They talked quietly awhile, then the young one concluded aloud, "We don't create anything; we just integrate ourselves into all that is."

What does a writer do with these clues? Since I seek abundance, I wait. After several days in San Antonio, my notebook also contains a sermon by a priest at the Cathedral of San Fernando, a long midnight run of jive talk by a street musician on a bridge, a sales pitch from a hat merchant at the open air mercado, a conversation with a cop at the Riverwalk, and a host of other fragments. Ironically, I have gathered these texts while avoiding most sessions of the 1987 NCTE annual convention. The convention taught me so much about language and literature in a few stellar sessions, I had to flee from the chrome chairs of Medina Level B, and listen in the streets to the spoken language itself. From this abundance, I have written a long letter to a friend, which will become an essay called "The Source of All Knowledge in San Antonio." Two years beyond the first quick notes to myself, I'm sending this essay to my agent.

That was a rich few days, and a lingering two years. But throughout life I find myself barraged with rich conversation. I was sitting in a bar in Philadelphia, late one November evening, when I took down this conversation from two regulars in the next booth:

"So, you're going to be a father--when?"

"March."

"You going to be a husband, too?"

"Don't know. Maybe summer."

"Maybe, huh? You don't know or she don't."

"I don't."

"Ah!"

What can I do with that? The characterization strikes me as very rich, very concise. Because all questions are not answered, there is room for a story to grow.

Or what can I do with the sentence I overheard at an education conference: "Our district went on an economy drive--we don't use margins anymore!" Or the line I overheard on a plane out of Cheyenne: "Danielle Steele? Oh, she's okay if you're on a cruise and the pool is full." Or the lament by the cop at the cafe, as he put on his hat to go out into the rain: "Well, I guess I better get out there and fight crime, and sin, and lust, and pestilence. I keep fighting, but I never win. Oh well--God! It's raining, too!"

What I do with such fragments, again, is wait. Either several conversations will group themselves naturally in my mind into some kind of constellation for an essay, or they will simply enrich my abiding pleasure in the language and whet my hearing for more.

Informal Speeches

I sat on a stone bench outside the downtown library in my native city of Portland, Oregon, listening as a street musician named Gypsy Slim, who had camped between two shopping carts for some

months, harangued the pedestrians.

"I been to college," he proclaimed to a woman who had paused to listen, "majored in physics, minored in philosophy, and all the scientists will tell you the temperate zone is the most healthy--regular seasons, hot and cold. But I don't care if it's house, job, creed, ethnic group, country, institution, or sex--they all try to stifle what you can be!" Then his saxophone wrangled the air and pigeons scattered, and his listeners mostly tossed quarters into his hat and moved on.

On my stone bench, I put down the book I had been reading, and took out my notebook to get Slim's list. It took him, the outsider, to tell us all something true about ourselves. How could I honor what he knew?

Several weeks later, he disappeared. Now it has been years, and the pedestrians walk freely up the north side of Taylor Street. I brooded over his words, repeated them to friends. Troubled by his passing, I wrote a poem called "Whatever Happened to Gypsy Slim?" The poem quotes his harangue. I wrote an essay called "Local Character," in which Slim's speech sets the keynote for a host of eccentrics teaching hard truths to the communities they inhabit. I wrote a short story called "A Dancer on Salmon Street," in which Gypsy Slim's words help an exile from office work change his life. Many heard him speak; I wrote it down, and I study it over by writing it again and again.

As a writer, I am aware of the ethical issues involved in taking texts from strangers. I take these issues seriously. If I

can't find Gypsy Slim to ask his permission before quoting him, am I a thief? My students ask me this, and I ask myself. It would be very wrong to use Slim's words irresponsibly. It would also be wrong to ignore his words. I take the risk because I believe in what he said to all of us. Sometime my eavesdropping may get me in trouble. If we don't listen, if we avoid the issue by borrowing only from books, we are all in trouble.

Gypsy Slim's speech found its way into my writing. Other speeches haven't yet. Take the fervent editorial spoken by my neighbor at the counter of the Skyline Cafe in Powell, Wyoming: "Son, you can go down to the variety store and get yourself a little bitty alligator no bigger than a lead pencil, and feed it bits of hamburger every day for a hundred years and it won't grow at all, but you start giving it whole hamburger patties on a plate and it will turn into a goddamn monster overnight, and that's <u>just</u> what happened to our federal government!"

I accept this gift. It is one of the most ambitious, breathless sentences I know. It gives me permission to stretch and listen to the long sentences that rise in my own voice.

In the midst of some danger, I relish the airline flight attendant's dig as we descend through low clouds toward the ground: "Ladies and gentlemen, you may have noticed the Captain has turned on the 'No Smoking' sign. This is his way of signaling to us that he <u>has</u> found the airport."

Written Texts

There are private ways to publish. You can pay a printer to run your verse, and then hawk your own books, which some call vanity publishing. Or you can staple your work to telephone poles, which I call generosity.

In Tijuana I found a love song nailed to a pole late one Halloween night. The song was called "Mi Tijuana Querida," and it was a love song to the city itself. I stood in the dim light taking that text down, including the sentence in small writing at the end, which I translated, "You can't pay for this--it is for you." In Brooklyn, I found an anti-war parody of a Frost poem glued to a lamp post, beginning, "Whose head this is, I think I know...." I transcribed the verses that hadn't been bitten away by sleet. In Portland, I lifted a letter pasted to the sidewalk by rain beside a pile of someone's earthly possessions flung from an apartment window. It began, "John--Don't call Uncle Sammy anymore...." It ended, "Work Work Work. Pray Pray Pray. Write letters. No Calls. Violet."

What shall I do with these texts? One impulse is to ignore them. There is a privacy in them, and a sufficiency to the moment of finding them. But I also feel the impulse to listen to the lives behind them, be their courier. With these, I don't know yet. And I feel in this "not knowing yet" the excitement of the writing life. I have a trove that might glitter in the sunlight, but I keep it hidden for now, wanting to do right. Something in my life will tell me what to do.

As I rambled the little town of Bucoda, Washington, early one morning, I came across a junk store with two tremendous padlocks on the door, a maze of wires extending from the doorknob inside, and a message spray-painted silver on the front wall: "Locks electrically charged." Anyone who so much as touched the locks, apparently, would be zapped. Inside, I could see mounds of tools, paintings, furniture, and dust--nothing that wasn't cracked, broken, yet so fiercely guarded. Then, I saw this letter taped to the glass from the inside:

> The passing of a loving and dear friend. Now I'm not married so its not my wife But mans best freind "His Dog." My dog Bandito part husky disappeared from my home in Bucoda Friday Jan 3rd 1985. A neighbor reported that he heard a gun shot which woke him up 4 PM Saturday morning I hope you Bandito didn't die of a gun shot wound. I hear you were taken by force that you leave a house of good master a nice and loving. Im beginning to miss your presence at foot of my bed when I eat a meal your beging for a share that Im having Im glad that I had a part of your life you will be missed.
>
> signed a old man of
>
> Bucoda Wash
>
> Mr. Nu

Someday I will write an essay called "Looking for Mr. Nu." I will go back to Bucoda and find the man. My notebook reminds me I have

this assignment. Mr. Nu lost Bandito. I can't afford to lose Mr. Nu.

Graffiti and Short Phrases

We are surrounded by bits of wisdom and humor, puns, proverbs, jingles, little prayers, short phrases that go suddenly deep in the midst of the passing flow. A writer takes them seriously by taking them down. It is important for me to know that someone at my college has written on the wall of a restroom stall, "How do you define success in college? Being as intelligent when you get out as when you started." It is important for me to write down my four-year-old daughter's assessment: "Papa, we have a cuckoo clock instead of a television, right?" I need to consider the implications of the warning at Bert Grim's Old Town Tattoo Parlor: "You must be 18 or older to be tattooed." I ponder the question on the marquee at the cleaners: "If your life were on VCR, would you watch it?"

What does it mean about American culture that a shirt at Nantucket proclaims, "He who dies with the most toys wins," while an Idaho bumper sticker holds, "My wife yes, my dog, maybe, my gun never"? I live with these short texts of American literature, give them a second chance to work on my mind by copying them small in my notebook. The hand-painted sign by a house in a poor neighborhood could launch a short story: "This is our home please dump your gargage elsewhere!" The words etched in the rear-view

mirror of a rental car could tease me into an essay about time and change: "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear."

Such passages might not actually appear in stories, poems, or essays I come to write. They lie behind the solitary work of the imagination, inviting it forward. In my daily writing life, such phrases work like known catalysts to bring the unknown story into being.

These language gifts surround me. While others seem to overhear these gifts on occasion and by chance, I try to make the hearing and recording of them my central mission as a writer, and a key invitation to writing students. We start by taking dictation on the world, and then work together on what comes. The habit of listening attentively to quickly passing moments of coherence in the talk around us seems to train the mind to catch its own moments of discovery. Dreams get away if we don't tell them, or write them down. Thoughts do the same. The writer's greatest tool may be faith in a fragment. I try to train my mind to know that this thing I have overheard may be a moment's pleasure--and my invitation for a week's work. It is small, but it is mine. I heard it for a reason. No one else knows the story it is trying to tell.

In this way, the writing teacher is simply the one most consistently flaunting the pleasures of the common language. We start each class by sharing recent discoveries from our notebooks, then we ask each other, "What might you do with that?"

The best teaching happens by direct example--reading the world, showing delight in what we find, and inviting more.

I say to my students, "That is fine. When will I get to read what you will write from this thing you have found?"

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